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ON PAGE A-5

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COPTERS TO GO ON AIDING HONDURANS

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WASHINGTON, March 27 — The Reagan Administration said today that so long as Honduran troops stayed near their border with Nicaragua, United States Army helicopters would remain at their disposal to fly in weapons, ammunition, food and other supplies.

The helicopters, piloted by American crews, began ferrying a 600-man detachment of Honduran soldiers to the border Wednesday to counter what the State Department characterized as an invasion by about 1,500 Nicaraguan troops. Nicaragua denied that its forces had crossed the frontier, which runs, largely unmarked, through remote, sparsely populated terrain.

According to reports from Honduras, the Nicaraguans attacked rebel bases, not Honduran targets. There have been numerous other such Nicaraguan attacks on the United States-backed rebels in the past.

Charles Redman, a State Department spokesman, said about half of the 600 men were transported Wednesday, and a Defense Department spokesman said the rest were taken in today. Officials here said that 16 American helicopters were being used, including UH-1's known as Hueys, and two Chinook helicopters.

Landing Away From Fighting

The officials said they were landing an unspecified distance from the reported area of fighting to minimize the possibility of American casualties.

Mr. Redman said the fighting today was tapering off and the Hondurans were "beginning to conduct mop-up operations to secure the area." He added:

"The airlift will continue until the Government of Honduras feels that the border situation no longer warrants our participation in transporting troops. So I have to leave it in that relatively vague form, because it's dependent on what the Honduran Government sees as its requirements."

A Pentagon spokesman said that the helicopters would continue to transport weapons, ammunition, food, and other supplies as long as the troops remained in the region, which is an area they do not normally patrol. The United States would also fly them out of the region when the fighting was finished, he said. Eight to 12 artillery pieces had been flown in so far, the Pentagon reported.

Figures on Forces Vary

After the Nicaraguan rebels, known as contras, began using Honduran territory as a base and sanctuary, the Nicaraguan Government has sent troops into Honduras against them repeatedly.

"There clearly have been hundreds of Sandinista incursions into Honduran territory over the past years," Mr. Redman said. But he asserted that this one was "the deepest, largest, most serious Nicaraguan penetration of Honduran territory ever."

A high-ranking United States intelligence official gave a different picture, however. He said that the size of the Nicaraguan force was less than the contras had told Washington — about 1,000 rather than the 1,500 the Administration announced — and that it went into an area where Nicaraguans have gone a number of times before. His comment came as a source in Honduras who has been briefing journalists on the incident suggested that the Nicaraguans who crossed the border may have totaled closer to 800.

At least one Sandinista unit was badly mauled in the fighting, the intelligence official said, apparently because the Nicaraguans were surprised by the large contra forces present. A large number of Nicaraguan soldiers were taken prisoner, he said.

Attacks on Miskito Indians

Mr. Redman also reported Sandinista attacks on Miskito Indians who are part of the rebel forces inside Nicaragua near the Rio Coco. He said: "We understand that there have been civilian casualties and that as many as 3,500 Nicaraguan Indian refugees may have fled into Honduras."

In the past, Honduras has generally ignored incursions into its border regions by Sandinista troops, leaving the combat to the contras. This time, too, the initial reaction was hesitant. Honduras first denied that an attack had taken place and was forced to acknowledge it only after it was publicized by the Reagan Administration as an assault on Honduran sovereignty. President Reagan also made an emergency grant of \$20 million in military aid to Honduras.

Normally, a Pentagon spokesman explained, the Hondurans would transport their troops by truck to their southern border area, if they went at all. Honduras has only a few Huey helicopters for command purposes.

The American helicopters and pilots are based at Palmerola, about 46 miles northwest of Tegucigalpa, Honduras, the spokesman said, part of a contingent of 500 to 600 United States military personnel including communications technicians, mechanics, logistics specialists and the like. All together, about 2,500 American servicemen are in Honduras.

The base at Palmerola began as a construction project during Big Pine, the military exercise conducted three years ago, the spokesman explained. An asphalt air strip has been built there to accommodate large C-130 and C-141 cargo planes.